

Christine Faber

The Unsettled State of America

Contemporary Narratives of Home and Mobility in Times of Crisis

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5282/oph.22>

English Summary

This book explores how contemporary American novelists express the malaise and sense of contingency felt in the crisis-ridden historical present through two distinct tropes in their storytelling: home and mobility. I contend that the image of home—and related concepts such as domesticity, belonging and stability—as well as the notion of mobility—connected to the ideas of progress, the journey and dislocation—have been utilized by novelists to address and accentuate the anxious and uncertain post-9/11 esprit.

My discussion centers on works of fiction by five contemporary North-American novelists: Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King*, Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. What unites these novels is that they all give voice to the looming sense of contingency that marks the new normal. Crises can happen at any moment, without much warning—as the recent shock of the pandemic has made all too clear—and the works of fiction by these five authors all explore this underlying sense of threat and uncertainty through the double prism of home and mobility.

The opening chapter chronicles the centrality of the concepts of home and mobility in the American mindset by spotlighting a selection of formative periods, national policies and cultural phenomena in US history, starting with the nation's settlement period. Close readings of recent novels by Auster, McCarthy, Eggers, Ford and Mandel form the core of the following chapters of this book. In the second chapter, the physical space of home takes center stage. The disintegrating and precarious dwelling places in these stories set in anxious times take on symbolic significance, becoming emblems of an America in decline. The third chapter continues exploring these works of fiction by shifting the focus to the concept of (im)mobility and the journey motif to

convey a sense of anxious disorientation and dwindling opportunities. The closing chapter builds on the two previous chapters to explore how these stories not only grapple with the fundamental impermanence of home, but also call for a reconceptualization of what it means to feel at home in the midst of shifting and uncertain circumstances. Finally, the epilogue probes how the concepts of home and mobility, explored throughout this book, come to the forefront in the profoundly destabilizing Covid-19 outbreak.

This book includes excerpts from exclusive interviews that I conducted with four of the five authors that I analyze in my work: Paul Auster, Dave Eggers, Richard Ford and Emily St. John Mandel. These interviews offer unique and illuminating insights into the authors' novels.

My work aims to add to and enrich the existing and comprehensive body of research on home and mobility, offering a new angle by exploring how these concepts have permeated fiction written in the age of 'polycrisis'—the current phenomenon of there being several interconnected crises of widespread impact within a brief time span. The questions that this book explores have become all the more urgent in the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which has upended the world as we knew it. What is home, and how can a stable sense of home be located in times of profound disorientation? How can the concept of mobility help us to navigate and interpret the constantly shifting and unstable reality that we are experiencing in our contemporary times of crisis? How can writers address and explore the complexities of our current historical moment? Never is there a greater need, or more potential, for writers to produce stories that cut to the very core of uncomfortable truths than in times of national upheaval. Such a moment of rupture can become a catalyst to question perceived certainties, to interrogate and reappraise the value and belief systems which always appeared reliable and stable, but which suddenly come undone—and fiction offers an ideal space for precisely such probing and questioning to occur.